



Making progress in Northern Ireland? Evidence from recent elections

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Making Progress in Northern Ireland? Evidence from Recent Elections

THE ELECTION OF 582 COUNCILLORS TO NORTHERN IRELAND'S 26 local authorities on 21 May 1997 was eclipsed, to a large extent, by the media focus on the General Election earlier that month (1 May). That little attention is paid to the only elected forum with executive powers in Northern Ireland is neither new nor surprising. Councils in the province have relatively few functional responsibilities, confined principally to the delivery of regulatory services (street cleaning, refuse collection, leisure and tourism and a limited role in economic development); representation on area boards which deliver major services such as education; and a consultative role in relation to planning, roads, water and housing which are delivered through 'Next Steps' agencies or similar arm's-length organizations. This minor role is reflected in the level of council budgets. In 1997/98, the estimated net expenditure for local government in Northern Ireland amounts to £230 million, approximately three per cent of identifiable public expenditure.¹

None the less, local government in Northern Ireland has a significance beyond the election process. Its *raison d'être* as a tier of government owes much to the abuse of power by councils prior to local government reorganization in October 1973 and unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland's devolved (Stormont) Parliament from 1921 to 1972.² Since then, in the absence of any other democratic executive forum, council chambers have become the

¹ Department of the Environment for Northern Ireland, Local Government Division, *District Council (NI) Rate Statistics Tables, 1997-98*, Belfast, Department of the Environment (NI), 1997.

² J. McGarry and B.O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995; J. Whyte, 'How much discrimination was there under the Unionist Regime 1921-68?', in T.Gallagher and J. O'Connell (eds) *Contemporary Irish Studies: 1-35*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1983; J. Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990.

mechanism for the expression of political opinions, sometimes vitriolic and often well beyond the ambit of their direct powers. The system of Direct Rule, imposed under the Northern Ireland (Temporary Provisions) Act 1972, has created a 'democratic deficit' whereby the Secretary of State (currently, Mo Mowlam), a Westminster cabinet member, has direction and control of the Northern Ireland Office and six civil service departments which operate in the social and economic fields.³ Senior civil servants are responsible to a ministerial team whose constituency base is in Great Britain with no electoral accountability to the citizens of Northern Ireland. In these circumstances, the role of local councillors assumes an importance beyond the narrow confines of their direct responsibilities and they frequently mediate between constituents and central service providers over issues of housing, planning and, in particular, social security. Finally, any future political accommodation in Northern Ireland, arising from the recent multi-party agreement, will involve a reassessment of the role of local government.

It is for these reasons that councils in Northern Ireland are worthy of academic scrutiny. An examination of local government elections, in particular, offers a more detailed analysis of underlying political movements than either Westminster or European elections, or indeed, the Forum election of June 1996. This article will therefore consider the political context within which the 1997 Northern Ireland local government elections took place, the election campaign and results, and present an evaluation of the ensuing political changes both within councils and, more broadly, possible consequences for future macro political developments.

³ The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 3 May 1997. She has direction and control of the Northern Ireland Office whose responsibilities include political, constitutional, security and criminal justice matters; and of six Northern Ireland departments – agriculture, economic development, education, environment, finance and personnel, and health and social security. The Secretary of State is assisted by four junior ministers (Paul Murphy, Adam Ingram, Tony Worthington and Lord Dubs) who have day-to-day responsibility for particular areas of work. The Secretary of State and her colleagues are answerable to Parliament in London for the discharge of their functions.

MACRO POLITICAL CONTEXT

Any discussion of the 1997 local government elections would be vacuous without first considering the wider political landscape within which councils operate. Since the previous local government elections in 1993, several important developments had taken place. The inter-party political talks, set up in 1991, to find a means by which substantial power and responsibility might be transferred to locally elected representatives, were bogged down in procedural and substantive wrangling.⁴ When they eventually foundered, the then British Prime Minister (John Major) and the Irish Taoiseach (Albert Reynolds) seized the initiative and issued a joint communiqué, the Downing Street Declaration (December 1993). The Joint Declaration set out the constitutional principles and political realities which would safeguard the vital interests of both communities in Northern Ireland. The British government reiterated Northern Ireland's statutory constitutional guarantee and reaffirmed its commitment to uphold the democratic wish of the greater number of people to support the Union or a sovereign United Ireland. The Irish government accepted that the right of self determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with, and subject to, the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland (Joint Declaration, 15 December 1993, Northern Ireland Office). The Joint Declaration, set alongside a flurry of secret discussions that included an unpublished peace plan agreed between the SDLP and Sinn Féin, acted as a catalyst for the first IRA cease-fire and prompted the Framework Documents.

On 31 August 1994, the IRA announced their 'complete cessation of military operations', followed by the Loyalists' cease-fire announcement on 13 October 1994. This allowed the government to move towards exploratory dialogue with Sinn Féin and Loyalist representatives. In the case of the former, this centred on how they might be admitted to inclusive talks. For both groups, it concerned how they could play a full role in the normal political life of Northern

⁴ Talks between the main constitutional parties were brokered by the then Secretary of State (Peter Brooke) and commenced in March 1991. They proceeded in three 'strands' (British government and main NI parties; relationship between the people of Ireland; and the relationship between the British and Irish governments). The talks closed in November 1992 without agreement but a series of bilateral discussions with constitutional parties began in September 1993.

Ireland, as well as the practical consequences of ending violence. A series of confidence-building measures was introduced to build upon the climate of opportunity for peace-building which prevailed. These included, *inter alia*, lifting the broadcasting ban on supporters of terrorist organizations, rescinding exclusion orders, and legislation enacted allowing the release of fixed-term terrorist prisoners, subject to continued good behaviour, once half of the sentence was served.

To assist multilateral dialogue and agreement towards an overall political settlement, the British and Irish governments published 'Frameworks for the Future' (February 1995). The document, whilst not offered as a blueprint, outlined what an overall settlement might look like and represented a shared understanding of the elements likely to offer the best prospects of broad support across the community in Northern Ireland. Proposals included the establishment of a 90-member assembly elected by proportional representation, and a system of checks and balances intended to sustain the confidence of both communities in the proposed new institutions. The Irish government, for its part, proposed changes to its constitution (the controversial articles 2 and 3) removing any jurisdictional or territorial claim of legal right over Northern Ireland contrary to the will of the people.

Political progress remained elusive however, and the government did not judge that there was sufficient confidence for all-party negotiations in the absence of any significant progress on the decommissioning of terrorist arms. To break the impasse, the government set out the principles⁵ against which they would judge the sincerity of the Loyalist and Republican parties to embrace democratic politics. The paramilitaries refused to disarm in advance of talks and in November 1995, the two governments launched the Twin Track Initiative aimed at creating the confidence necessary for substantive all-party negotiations to begin by the end of February 1996. The initiative established an international body (the Mitchell Commission) to examine the decommissioning of illegal arms and

⁵ The three principles were:

- show a willingness in principle to disarm progressively;
- develop a common practical understanding of the modalities, i.e. to say what decommissioning actually entails;
- in order to test the practical arrangements, and to demonstrate good faith, decommission some arms as a tangible confidence-building measure and to signal the start of the process.

a parallel phase of preparatory talks designed to examine the basis, participation, structure, format and agenda for all-party negotiations. The Mitchell Commission (January 1996) reaffirmed that paramilitaries would not disarm and, as an alternative, set out a series of principles to which all parties to talks would have to subscribe. The British government reacted by sidestepping the major thrust of the Commission's findings, seizing instead upon a relatively minor confidence-building measure in the report, namely, an elected assembly to provide a mandate for talks without prior decommissioning.

Soon afterwards (February 1996), the IRA ended its cease-fire with the Canary Wharf bomb in London. Nationalists (SDLP and Sinn Féin) accused the British government of 'political mugging' and pandering to Unionists in an effort to prop up their dwindling majority in the House of Commons. In so doing, they had squandered the respite in violence and dragged their heels on political progress. Unionists (the UUP and DUP) felt vindicated in refusing to join round-table talks in advance of decommissioning terrorist weapons.

Within days of the London bombing, a flurry of activity by the British and Irish governments produced a consensus on future progress. A firm date (10 June 1996) was set for the start of all-party negotiations, following an elective process to a new 110-strong 'Peace' Forum. However, it was stressed that Sinn Féin could not participate in the talks until there was an unequivocal restoration of the IRA cease-fire.

The Forum's brief was deliberative only, specifically to promote dialogue, understanding and consensus across the communities of Northern Ireland (but with no power to determine the conduct, course or outcome of the negotiations). Teams were nominated from the parties elected to the Forum to engage in multi-party talks. After their inception in June 1996, progress in the talks, the proceedings of which are generally confidential, was extremely slow. Considerable time was spent agreeing rules of procedure in the tense atmosphere surrounding the parades at Drumcree (July 1996) and the issue of decommissioning dogged proceedings prior to the Westminster and local government elections in 1997, by which point no agreement had been reached on the issue. When the talks reconvened under a new Labour government (June 1997), a decommissioning plan setting out the structures and mechanism for dealing with this

problem, involving an independent commission, was launched simultaneously with the start of substantive negotiations in September. The British government, under the legislation, did not want the talks to continue beyond May 1998 and required a settlement by that stage.

In the meantime, the IRA unexpectedly announced the 'unequivocal restoration of the cease-fire of August 1994' effective from 20 July 1997. This, according to Sinn Féin, resulted from their demands being met by the new Labour government. These are that

- Sinn Féin would be admitted to all-party talks on the same basis as other parties;
- those talks would be completed within a fixed time frame, preferably six months;
- the government would not require decommissioning of weapons before or during negotiations;
- confidence-building measures would be introduced after the cease-fire, such as relaxing security policy and the regime in prisons.

The unionists remained deeply suspicious of Sinn Féin's motives and suspected the IRA of calling a tactical cease-fire only.

The discussions in the three strands proceeded until January 1998 when the two governments tabled a set of propositions on heads of agreement outlining a possible settlement. Detailed discussions followed in the light of this document with agreement being reached on 10 April 1998 (Good Friday). The Agreement was ratified in a referendum on 22 May 1998. A majority of 676,966 voted 'Yes' (71.12 per cent) and 274,879 voted 'No' (28.88 per cent). The turnout was exceptionally high at 951,845 (80.9 per cent). Elections to the new Assembly follow on 25 June 1998.

LOCAL POLITICAL CONTEXT

Local government as an elected forum is not impervious to the vagaries of macro political developments or lack thereof. Equally, the developments within local government can and do have a bearing on the wider Northern Ireland conflict, with the balance of evidence over time pointing increasingly to a generally benign influence. Councils in Northern Ireland, despite their limited functions, suffered from a very negative political image during the mid-1980s. The election of Sinn Féin to councils for the first time in 1985

Table 1
Northern Ireland Local Government Elections since 1973

Year	Percentage Share of Poll by Political Party								
	UUP	DUP	IND.U	PUP/UDP	APNI	SDLP	SFein	Con	Oth
1973	41.4	4.3	10.9		13.7	13.4			16.3
1977	29.6	12.7	8.5		14.4	20.6			13.2
1981	26.5	26.6	4.2		8.9	17.5			15.3
1985	29.5	24.3	3.1		7.1	13.4	11.8		5.8
1989	31.4	17.7	3.9		6.8	21.2	11.2	1.1	7.0
1993	29.3	17.2	2.7		7.7	21.9	12.5	1.5	7.2
1997	27.8	15.6	2.5	2.2/1	6.6	20.7	16.9	1.0	5.7

Key to Political Parties:

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

IND.U: Independent Unionists (assorted individuals)

PUP/UDP: Progressive Unionist Party/Ulster Democratic Party (fringe loyalists)

APNI: Alliance Party

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

SFein: Sinn Fein

Con: Conservative Party

Oth: Others (assorted individuals)

Table 2
Northern Ireland Local Government Elections Since 1977

Year	Seats Gained by Political Party						TOTAL
	UUP	DUP	APNI	SDLP	SFein	Oth	
1977	175	71	70	114		96	526
1981	151	142	38	103		92	526
1985	190	142	34	101	59	40	566
1989	191	110	38	121	43	63	566
1993	197	103	44	127	51	60	582
1997	185	91	41	120	74	71	582

Key to political parties:

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

APNI: Alliance Party

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

SFein: Sinn Fein

Oth: Others (assorted individuals)

caused a furore amongst unionists who reacted with a 'smash Sinn Fein' campaign aimed at isolating their councillors through exclusion from committees and filibustering tactics. Unionists also demanded that Sinn Fein councillors be compelled to sign a declaration against

violence but this was challenged in the courts and declared illegal. However, these protests were superseded by a campaign of opposition, waged by unionists, against the Anglo-Irish Agreement (November 1985). Arguing that to administer local government was to give tacit support to the London–Dublin partnership, unionists adjourned all council meetings and refused to strike a district rate. The minister responsible took powers to appoint commissioners and empower council officials to carry out functions. Cracks, however, began to appear in the unionist protest campaign. A mass resignation proposal, aimed at all Ulster Unionist (UUP) and Democratic Unionist (DUP) councillors, was rejected. Some protest authorities met to strike a rate for the financial year 1987–88, and accusations abounded of surreptitious business taking place in unionist councils. Services continued to be provided amidst fears that nationalist councils were obtaining additional resources through regular ministerial contact. The protest withered to an inauspicious end.⁶

The results of the local government elections of 1989 marked a turning-point in council chambers with a degree of moderation not unrelated to the decline in representation from the political extremes (see Tables 1 and 2). From this stable political environment an experiment in ‘responsibility sharing’⁷ developed between the main nationalist and unionist parties, the SDLP and UUP respectively. The horrific carnage, even by Northern Ireland’s standards, of the Remembrance Day bombing in Enniskillen (November 1987) also appears to have had a profound impact on local politicians by fostering a climate of accommodation hitherto lacking. The process was consolidated by the 1993 local election results. In part, this reflects the psychological impact of the ‘numbers game’, a factor that cannot be overstated in Northern Ireland. The paradox of the

⁶ M. Connolly and C. Knox, ‘Recent Political Difficulties of Local Government in Northern Ireland’, *Policy and Politics*, 16:2 (1988), pp. 89–97; C. Knox, ‘Sinn Féin and Local Elections: The Government’s Response in Northern Ireland’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 43:4 (1990), pp. 448–63; C. Knox, ‘The 1989 Local Elections in Northern Ireland’, *Irish Political Studies*, 5 (1990), pp. 77–84.

⁷ This term evolved in deference to Unionist sensitivities over the use of the words ‘power-sharing’. Dungannon District Council is credited with leading the way in rotating the council chair between the two main political parties, the SDLP and UUP, although some councils (mainly nationalist-controlled) claim to have been doing this for years in a less high-profile manner.

double minority is well known (that is, a Protestant minority in Ireland as a whole, but a Catholic minority in Northern Ireland). To this can be added the third case, that of a Protestant minority west of the River Bann, which bisects Northern Ireland. As one councillor remarked:

the unionists should have regard to the fact that in 1993, the majority of votes in Cookstown [a council west of the Bann] were non-unionist votes and it is only by accident [that is, the mechanics of the STV electoral system] that they have a majority on the council. Now the fact that they didn't share all down the years raises a question mark over whether or not their conversion is complete but I do honestly believe that many of them are sincere about achieving better relations, although there could be an element of keeping an eye to the future when they know the boot is going to be on the other foot. (Private interview.)

This new *rapprochement* between political parties was also reflected in an improvement in central-local relations. As local authorities demonstrated a willingness to undertake their role in what central government saw as a constructive manner, additional responsibilities were delegated to councils. Three important new functions are illustrative of the emergence of local government from the political wilderness, namely, economic development, community relations and partnerships.

First, in the field of economic development, local authorities were traditionally incidental players, their involvement being limited to making contributions to any voluntary body which developed trade, industry and commerce in their area or, more generally, for furthering 'the interests of the council, its district or inhabitants' (section 115, Local Government Act 1972). Total payments were limited to threepence in the pound on the rateable value of the district.⁸ Since 1992, however, councils have been permitted to spend up to five pence in the pound from rates for the specific purpose of economic development. Although modest when compared with the budgets of central government agencies (the Industrial Development Board and Local Economic Development Unit) with the same responsibility, councils have been innovative in its usage. They have

⁸ Local government in Northern Ireland has not been the subject of rates reform experienced by councils in Great Britain in the late 1980s which heralded the much criticized community charge and subsequent council tax. For a detailed description of the comparison between Northern Ireland local government finance and the rest of the United Kingdom see R. R. Barnett and C. Knox, 'Accountability and Local Budgetary Policy: Unitary Principles?', *Policy and Politics*, 20:4 (1992), pp. 265-76.

established extensive networks with private companies, set up arm's-length enterprise facilities and used their limited resources as seed-corn finance or matching grants to tap into larger EC funding sources.⁹

Secondly, local councils have acquired a growing prominence in the field of community development and community relations. In 1989, the Central Community Relations Unit (CCRU)¹⁰ invited councils to participate in a community relations programme aimed at developing cross-community contact and cooperation between the two communities, promoting greater mutual understanding, and increasing respect for different cultural traditions. The programme attracted a 75 per cent grant-aid from central government to employ community relations officers within councils and implement programmes of activity congruent with the above objectives. All 26 councils joined the initiative which was subsequently judged a useful community-based approach to micro conflict management.¹¹ Given the conditions associated with joining the initiative (e.g. agreement on a cross-party basis to participate), vesting responsibility for community relations in local councils was, from a government perspective, a way of promoting consensus at the political level and, by example, in the community. An active involvement in this area by councils, given their chequered history of discrimination and sectarianism, has added to the emerging climate of cross-party cooperation and stability and demonstrated a more responsible approach to an incremental increase in devolved powers.

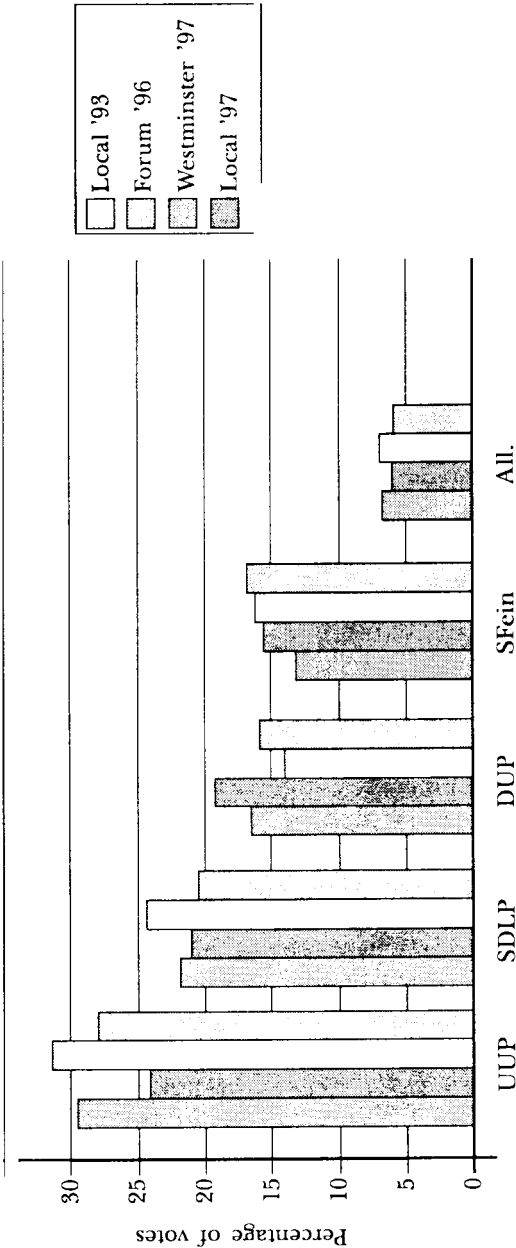
Thirdly, and most recently, local authorities have become major brokers in partnership arrangements designed to deliver European-funded service programmes. In 1995, the European Community launched a Special Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, a 300 MECU package designed to reinforce progress towards a peaceful and stable society following the IRA and Loyalists' cease-fires. Additional funding of 100 MECU (in January 1998) brought the total programme allocation for the four-year period 1995-98 to some

⁹ C. Knox, 'Local Government in Northern Ireland?', *Ulster Papers in Public Policy and Management*, No. 62, 1996.

¹⁰ CCRU is a dedicated unit within the Central Secretariat of the Northern Ireland Office charged with formulating, reviewing and challenging policy throughout the government system with the aim of improving community relations.

¹¹ J. Hughes and C. Knox, 'For Better or Worse? Community Relations in Northern Ireland', *Peace and Change*, 22:3 (1997), pp. 330-55.

Figure 1
Percentage Vote by Political Parties



400 MECU (£280m). District partnerships, representing each of the council areas, and comprising local councillors, community/voluntary representatives, business and trade union interests, and statutory organizations approve action plans for local activities to advance the objectives of the programme. Thus far, district partnerships appear to have harnessed the emerging goodwill in local authorities, mobilized an apathetic business sector into taking ownership of social goals and energized the voluntary sector which has played a vital role in community development. Faced with a constitutional impasse, local authorities have acted as a pivotal broker in partnership arrangements for delivering public services.

THE ELECTORAL CONTEXT

To set the local government elections in context, it is worth considering the electoral performance of the main political parties both in the Forum elections (referred to above) and the Westminster elections on 30 May 1996 and 1 May 1997 respectively (see Figure 1). Northern Ireland has a range of electoral systems. Elections to the so-called Peace Forum used a list system organized in the eighteen parliamentary constituencies, but not by single transferable vote, supplemented by Northern Ireland-wide party preference.¹² The Westminster elections use the single-member plurality or 'first-past-the-post' system for eighteen parliamentary seats, and the European elections use the single transferable vote system of proportional representation in which the whole of Northern Ireland forms one three-member constituency.

¹² This system of voting emerged when the main political parties failed to agree on the type of electoral system to be used for the new Forum. The government therefore decided on a list system (but on a constituency basis) supplemented by NI-wide party preference. Five representatives were elected from each of the eighteen parliamentary constituencies, but not by PR/STV. Voters cast a single vote for the party of their choice on the ballot paper and party representatives were elected in each constituency in proportion to a party's vote. In each constituency, parties nominated, in advance, a list of named candidates who would constitute their representatives if elected. The votes cast for each party were also aggregated across Northern Ireland and the ten most successful parties, in addition, secured two elected representatives from candidates nominated for this purpose in advance.

The 1996 Forum elections were called by the government, hoping for a consensus to emerge in advance of all-party talks. Instead of undermining Sinn Féin, as the government had anticipated, the party's standing, in propaganda terms as well as votes, was greatly enhanced with a record share of the vote (15.5 per cent). Without an IRA cease-fire the party, however, would not be admitted to the negotiations making it impossible to initiate all-party talks. Unlike other elections, this one did not represent a battle between the SDLP and Sinn Féin for nationalist supremacy (except understandably in West Belfast). Although the SDLP polled a credible 21.4 per cent of the votes, there was some voting slippage to Sinn Féin. The DUP vote held up well (18.8 per cent) and endorsed the party's message that it wanted no part of a peace process which included Sinn Féin, even if it were to agree to parallel decommissioning. The UUP, the largest party in the Forum, fared better than expected (24.2 per cent) under its new leader David Trimble in the face of other pro-union candidates, specifically the UK Unionists (3.7 per cent) and fringe loyalist parties, the Progressive Unionist Party and Ulster Democratic Party (5.7 per cent). In a clear reference to the latter, the UUP demanded to know its stance on terrorism and decommissioning of terrorist weaponry to ensure only those committed to peaceful means and the democratic process were admitted to talks. In short, the outstanding feature of the Forum elections remained the increased poll for Sinn Féin and the failure to divert the pro-union vote away from both the UUP and DUP. The two extremes on the political spectrum were heavily endorsed with the moderate Alliance Party (6.5 per cent) becoming a victim of a no transfers election. The government's intentions were snubbed by the electorate for what it perceived as prevarication and obduracy during the seventeen months' cease-fire period.

The Westminster elections of May 1997 saw further gains by Sinn Féin to a record level of electoral support (from 10 to 16.1 per cent) and its advance to become the third largest political party (replacing the DUP) in Northern Ireland (behind the UUP and SDLP). Two celebrated victories by Sinn Féin leaders (Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams) in Mid-Ulster and West Belfast changed the political map at the expense of the DUP and SDLP respectively (ousting William McCrea and Joe Hendron). Inside unionism, the UUP increased its representation by taking the newly created West Tyrone seat. Although the UUP emerged as the dominant political party

with an increased number of Westminster seats (from nine to ten), its share of the vote decreased (from 34.5 to 32.7 per cent). Conversely, the DUP's vote improved slightly (from 13.1 to 13.6 per cent), but the loss in one seat (from three to two) especially to Sinn Fein, its avowed political enemy, was a major disappointment for the party. Within nationalism, the SDLP's vote remained solid (from 23.5 to 24.1 per cent) but, here again, the loss of West Belfast to Sinn Fein was a major electoral blow and decreased its Westminster representation (from four to three seats). Sinn Fein's share of the nationalist vote changed significantly from a 30:70 split (Sinn Fein: SDLP) in 1992 to 40:60 in 1997. Among the other parties, the UK Unionists (Robert McCartney) held North Down and the Alliance Party's vote decreased marginally (8.7 to 8 per cent) but once again they failed to gain a seat. Overall, nationalist voters had reasoned that strengthening Sinn Fein's electoral mandate was more likely to deliver peace than prolong violence. This, in turn, put pressure on the government to engage Sinn Fein in some way, official or unofficial, in talks. One psephologist assessing the elections commented: 'the results raised the question of whether there was now any ceiling to the Sinn Fein vote.'¹³ It is against this background that the 1997 local government elections took place, less than three weeks later.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS (21 MAY 1997)

Elections to local councils in Northern Ireland occur every four years using the single transferable vote system of proportional representation. The previous elections in 1993 had produced little by way of change in the local electoral landscape (see Tables 1 and 2). The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) remained the largest political party in councils, the Democratic Unionist Party's (DUP) vote share, despite expectations to the contrary, declined only marginally, and the combined nationalist vote of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and Sinn Fein recorded its highest level of support. The SDLP consolidated its position as the leading nationalist party and Sinn Fein halted a post-1985 decline in its electoral performance. Seventeen councils were

¹³ S. Elliott, 'Changes', *Fortnight*, 9–10 June 1997.

controlled by a combined unionist bloc, six by nationalists and three hung councils.¹⁴

The 1997 local elections saw 1,100 candidates contesting 582 seats in 26 council areas. A degree of election fatigue had set in with both the Forum and Westminster elections within the previous twelve months and three weeks respectively. The elections were seen, as ever in Northern Ireland, as a case of two contests *within* each community. The Ulster Unionist Party would attempt to extend its lead over the DUP, and Sinn Féin's significantly improving electoral strength would be tested by the SDLP. The political environment for the elections can best be described as intransigence and continuing violence: the political vacuum of multi-party talks apparently going nowhere; Sinn Féin's exclusion from the political process; and, ongoing IRA and loyalist violence, despite claims by the latter that their cease-fire remained intact. At the local level, however, the efforts of twelve of the 26 councils to engage, to varying degrees, in power sharing appeared to be at odds with the stalemate politics of the centre.

Party political positions on local government remained fairly predictable. Unionist parties demanded the restoration of powers to councils in a devolved system of administration, whilst nationalists implacably opposed any such change in the absence of an agreed overall constitutional settlement within which the role of local government would feature as one component (the idea that 'nothing is agreed until everything is agreed'). The SDLP had, however, placed itself in an incongruous position as the prime mover in power-sharing arrangements within councils, the direct result of which had been an improved image for local government and an increase in calls for greater powers. The Alliance Party also opposed any return of powers to local government, seeing such a move as a distraction from achieving agreement on shared institutions at the Northern Ireland-wide level.

Pre-election interest centred on the marginal unionist controlled councils of Belfast, Strabane and Fermanagh; nationalist Limavady and Magherafelt; and 'hung' Dungannon. Because of the symbolic importance of Belfast City Council, generally perceived as a bastion

¹⁴ P. Carmichael, 'The 1993 Local Government Elections in Northern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 9 (1994), pp. 141-7.

Table 3
Northern Ireland Local Government Elections May 1997

District	Number of Seats by Political party									Total
	UDP	PUP	DUP	UKU	UUP	APNI	SDLP	SFein	Oth	
Antrim			3		9	2	4	1		19
Ards			5		10	5	1		2	23
Armagh			2		10		7	3	22	
Ballymena			8		11	1	3		1	24
Ballymoney			6		4		3	1	2	16
Banbridge			3		9		3		2	17
Belfast	1	3	7		13	6	7	13	1	51
Carrickfergus			3		4	5			5	17
Castlereagh			10	1	5	4	2		1	23
Coleraine			5		10	3	3		1	22
Cookstown			2		4		4	5	1	16
Craigavon			3		11	1	7	2	2	26
Derry			4		3		14	8	1	30
Down			2		6		12	2	1	23
Dungannon			3		8		4	5	2	22
Fermanagh			2		9		4	5	3	23
Larne			3		6	1	1		4	15
Limavady			1		6		7	1		15
Lisburn	2		2		13	3	2	4	4	30
Magherafelt			3		3		5	5		16
Moyle			3		3		3	1	5	15
Newry Mourne			1		5		12	8	4	30
Newtownabbey1		1	2		10	3	1		7	25
North Down		2	2	3	6	6			6	25
Omagh			3		4	1	6	6	1	21
Strabane			3		3		5	4	1	16
TOTAL	4	6	91	4	185	41	120	74	57	582
Result under strict PR	6	13	91	3	162	38	120	98	51	582
1993 Result			103		197	44	127	51	60	582

Key to Political Parties:

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

DUP: Democratic Unionist Party

UKU: United Kingdom Unionists

PUP/UDP: Progressive Unionist Party/Ulster Democratic Party (fringe loyalists)

APNI: Alliance Party

SDLP: Social Democratic and Labour Party

SFein: Sinn Fein

Oth: Others (assorted individuals)

of unionism and the largest council by far in Northern Ireland,¹⁵ much media focus was on whether the city could have the first nationalist mayor in its history. Although each election in Northern Ireland is a repeat referendum on the constitutional preference of whether voters wish to remain within the United Kingdom, local issues emerged during the campaign. These tended to reflect specific parochial concerns and ranged from Sunday opening of leisure facilities (Cookstown), pedestrianization of the town centre (Antrim), parades (Craigavon and Ballymena), selling-off a council-owned arts centre (Down), siting of a community hospital (North Down), and a proposed superdump (Larne). Many issues of expressed local concern were often outside the remit of councils which could do little more than lobby appropriate government ministers, civil servants and statutory agencies.

The results of the elections highlighted a number of important political developments. Perhaps most significant was the size and complexion of the turnout (down from 54.7 per cent in 1993 to 53.77 per cent). Across the province, turnout tended to fall from west to east. Areas with more evenly balanced religious compositions (largely, in the west) recorded greater levels of voter activity (since every vote counts) than those which are predominantly Catholic or Protestant. For example, in Cookstown (with a fairly mixed population in terms of religious composition), one electoral division recorded a turnout of 83.38 per cent. By contrast, in North Down (overwhelmingly Protestant), one electoral division recorded a figure of only 30 per cent. Interestingly, in Belfast, turnout in overwhelmingly Catholic areas (such as Lower Falls, at 65.59 per cent) was considerably higher than in overwhelmingly Protestant ones (such as Pottinger, at 49.68 per cent). The divergence in turnout levels between predominantly Catholic and predominantly Protestant areas was significant. Simply, the sharp decline in unionist support, the unchecked growth of Sinn Féin's vote (see Tables 1 and 2), a surge in the numbers of nationalists coming out to vote, and the emergence of fringe loyalist parties as significant local political forces

¹⁵ Belfast City Council has a population (1995) of 296,300 and an estimated net expenditure (1997/98) of £61.5m. This compares with Lisburn Borough Council, the second largest council, whose population is 103,600 and expenditure of £10.5m. Moyle District Council is the smallest local authority with a population of 14,800 and expenditure of £1.95m.

in their own right, all combined to ensure dramatic changes in the political control of several councils. Overall, set against the 1993 results, the Ulster Unionist Party lost twelve seats and its share of the vote dropped 1.5 per cent; the Democratic Unionist Party also lost twelve seats and its vote declined by 1.6 per cent; and, the SDLP's vote fell by 1.2 per cent with a loss of seven seats. Meanwhile, the surge in support for Sinn Fein continued when it gained 23 seats and increased its share of the vote by 4.7 per cent. The fringe loyalist parties also made gains. The Progressive Unionist Party, linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force, went from one to six seats, and the Ulster Democratic Party, which is close to the Ulster Defence Association, went from one to four seats. The cross-community parties, Alliance and the Women's Coalition, had a disappointing performance. Alliance lost three seats overall (to 41) and its vote share decreased by 1.1 per cent (to 6.6 per cent). The Women's Coalition, fighting its first local government elections, fielded 20 candidates but only managed to secure one council seat. The mainstream unionist parties lost overall control of Belfast, Fermanagh, Cookstown and Strabane Councils. Combined unionist parties now control thirteen of the 26 districts and UUP overall control of Banbridge District Council brings this to fourteen. Nationalists, including Sinn Fein, control eight councils and SDLP overall control of Down brings this to nine. Three councils are effectively deadlocked – Belfast, Dungannon and Moyle – (see Table 3).

Unionists reacted angrily to Sinn Fein's election performance with the UUP leader, David Trimble, calling for a thorough investigation into what he described as 'massive electoral abuse'. The chief electoral officer, Pat Bradley, also conceded that, with 10,000 absent vote applications which appeared to have been filled on a 'production line', there may have been 'an orchestrated planned campaign of malpractice in voting'. However, he was not convinced 'it was all one-sided' and called on those making allegations to produce evidence (*Irish Times* and *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 May 1997). The DUP complained that Sinn Fein had been accorded an unfair high profile on polling day through its well-publicized meetings with British officials, sanctioned by Tony Blair, to clarify issues surrounding decommissioning. More significantly, unionists claimed that the Secretary of State's visits to nationalist residents' groups throughout the province, in areas of contentious Orange Order marches, handed Sinn Fein a major electoral

advantage. On Belfast's Ormeau Road, for example, Dr Mowlam, in front of television cameras, flung a friendly arm around Gerard Rice, a Sinn Fein member, former IRA prisoner and local residents' leader. Unionists also blamed election fatigue, internal splits and feuding within the unionist 'family', and apathy on the part of their supporters for party under-performance. This was compounded by a sense of alienation, they claimed, through the policies of the British government, and the perceived futility of voting to change them. The growing support for the fringe loyalist parties in local government, although confined to certain areas (greater Belfast), was seen as evidence of mounting frustration with the Ulster Unionists and DUP from the grassroots of unionism.

A high nationalist turnout and a significant transfer of SDLP voters to Sinn Fein were attributed to anger over the Drumcree issue of July 1996 where the RUC, after a long stand-off with the Orange Order accompanied by widespread rioting and disturbances, forced the marchers through the nationalist Garvaghy Road. Moreover, Sinn Fein's well established 'common touch' and adroit campaigning on bread-and-butter issues have clearly done much to consolidate its core vote. That said, the party did not benefit from transfers to the same extent as did the DUP from Ulster Unionists, leaving Sinn Fein under-represented in council chambers. Hence, Sinn Fein's 74 seats (on 16.9 per cent of the popular vote) represented just 12.7 per cent of the total seats. The DUP, with a smaller vote share (15.6 per cent), but benefiting from UUP transfers, won 91 seats. Sinn Fein's performance in Derry City Council represented a major symbolic victory where an increase of three seats wrested overall control of the council from the SDLP. Its *coup de grace*, however, (given allegations of widespread electoral malpractice) came in Belfast where the party's increase in seats (from ten to thirteen, and now joint largest party on the council with the UUP) made electoral history by ending unionist hegemony in what is undoubtedly a pillar of unionism, leaving the balance of power in the hands of the Alliance Party and fringe loyalists. The irony, of course, is that those most enthusiastic about the democratic process were supporters of Sinn Fein whose commitment to democracy has been, at best, equivocal. There was a strong nationalist perception that the British government had cynically sabotaged the IRA cease-fire and that,

consequently, supporting Sinn Fein still represented the best hope for peace. Unionists accused the SDLP of giving legitimacy to Sinn Fein by John Hume's single-handed ongoing collaboration with Gerry Adams in furtherance of a cease-fire. Attempts by the SDLP to distance itself electorally from Sinn Fein ('a vote for Sinn Fein is a vote of violence') had proved ineffective with a gap of less than 4 per cent between the parties. This caused rancour amongst the party's membership, some of whom vehemently disagreed with the leadership's collaboration tactics with Sinn Fein.

AN EVALUATION

Predictably, following the results in Belfast, the first nationalist Lord Mayor (Alban Maginness, SDLP) was elected to the City Council in its 150-year history, alongside an Ulster Unionist Deputy Mayor. Although responsibility-sharing had developed incrementally as trust grew between parties in councils, the addition of Belfast to the ranks was significant. The poor media image of local government in the past had been largely created by scenes of political hostility in Belfast's council chamber. Local government officials in other areas, many of whom were making strenuous efforts to raise the profile of their councils through economic development, tourism and EU links, felt frustrated by the negative antics of Belfast which overshadowed their endeavours. The symbolism of a nationalist mayor was captured by an editorial describing the event:

A new era has dawned for Belfast and Northern Ireland with the election of the city's first non-unionist Lord Mayor. It not only reflects a democratic change in the electorate, but a reality that has been denied too long . . . As the largest city, it helps to set the political agenda for the province as a whole, and its influence has not always been good . . . If Belfast Council can show the way, producing a city in which all its citizens can take pride equally, the effect on the wider political scene could be dramatic.

(Belfast Telegraph, 25 June 1996)

The overall pattern of responsibility-sharing changed little with the new appointments (mayor/deputy mayor in borough councils and chair/vice-chair in district councils) which followed the elections. Twelve councils, mainly nationalist or hung councils opted for cross-party posts, the exceptions being unionist-controlled Armagh and

Lisburn.¹⁶ This confirms the pattern of power-sharing since the mid-1980s, with unionists more reluctant to introduce a cross-community share-out of top posts.

Over the last decade, local authorities in Northern Ireland have emerged from an era characterized by discrimination and sectarianism. The future role of councils will be central to the administrative arrangements accompanying any constitutional settlement. Various suggestions have been made to enhance their existing role. There have been calls for both greater devolution of power to local government and a new form of regional government. In the former case, Archbishop Eames, Church of Ireland Primate, in his submission to the Opsahl Commission (a non-governmental forum established in February 1993 to elicit community views on the way forward) argued for more power to be given to local councils where there was evidence of sharing of responsibility. This, in his view, would be part of a more systematic progression which entailed 'slow, steady progress in building up inter-community confidence and trust.'¹⁷ In the latter, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, former head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, suggested a review in the form of Macrory II.¹⁸ Both alternatives envisage a greater role for local government but acknowledge that effective safeguards must exist to guard against abuses of power and allay the fears of nationalists. Other suggestions include a greater use of district partnerships, set up to distribute EC peace and reconciliation funds, in undertaking functions currently carried out by the plethora of appointed executive quangos, advisory bodies and tribunals, all of which add

¹⁶ Those councils currently (1997/98) engaged in responsibility sharing are: Armagh (SDLP:UU), Belfast (SDLP:UU), Derry (SDLP:DUP), Limavady (SDLP:UU), Lisburn (UU:SDLP), Down (SDLP:UU), Dungannon (SDLP:UU), Fermanagh (Ind.Nat:DUP), Magherafelt (SF:UU), Moyle (SDLP:UU), Newry and Mourne (SDLP:UU) and Omagh (SDLP:UU).

¹⁷ R. Eames, 'Ruthless Loyalists', *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 January 1993.

¹⁸ In 1969, the Northern Ireland government commissioned a report by Sir Patrick Macrory to examine the future of local government in the province. Macrory called for a restructuring of Northern Ireland's system of local government with the introduction of a new single tier of district councils to discharge essentially prosaic functions such as leisure services, civic and environmental services. Whilst the first stage of Macrory was implemented in 1973, with 26 new districts, implementation of the full proposals was quickly overtaken by the deteriorating political situation. The imposition of Direct Rule (from 1972) effectively stymied the bulk of Macrory's proposals.

to the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland.¹⁹

There has, however, been a decided reluctance on the part of government to tackle the role of councils in isolation, without progress on the broader constitutional front. Although welcomed by most councillors and officials, the incremental expansion of council functions has done no more than tinker at the margins of local government. Three related issues may herald a radical rethink on the future role of councils in Northern Ireland. First, the renewed IRA cease-fire (20 July 1997) and subsequent involvement of Sinn Féin in the multi-party talks leading to the Good Friday Agreement have broken the impasse on all forms of constitutional change which has been in abeyance since the introduction of Direct Rule in 1972 – what has been described as a state of ‘permanent impermanence’. The elections to the new Northern Ireland assembly and the manner in which the Assembly chooses to manage its responsibilities will bear crucially on this. Secondly, developments in local government in the rest of the UK, in particular moves towards unitary authorities and the introduction of the concept of ‘best value’, could well provide an opportunity for the long anticipated reorganization of 26 small Northern Ireland councils into a more efficient tier of government with an expanded role. And finally, pressure is growing (aided nationally by the impact of the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life under Lord Nolan’s chairmanship and, locally, by the appointment of Sir Len Peach as the Commissioner for Public Appointments in Northern Ireland) to dismantle the worst excesses of the quango state which have had a disproportionate impact in Northern Ireland. In the absence of alternative institutional arrangements, controversial functions (e.g. fair employment, local government staffing procedures) were hived off to non-departmental public bodies. Their burgeoning growth has accentuated a system of governance already suffering from problems of political accountability, openness and accessibility. Taken together, it is inevitable that these issues will create additional momentum for a radical rethink of the structure and role of local government in Northern Ireland.

¹⁹ P. Sweeney, *Achieving a More Participative and Inclusive Form of Democracy in Northern Ireland*, *Review of Northern Ireland Administrative Arrangements*, Belfast, Chief Executives’ Forum/Joseph Rowntree, 1997.